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AUTHOR Perham, Andrea J.
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ABSTRACT

In an introductory-level Romantic Poetry course, a loose-leaf notebook is kept on reserve in the library to serve as a classbook or collaborative journal in which all class members (including the teacher) write comments as the semester progresses. Entries are dated and addressed to individuals or to the class as a whole. Informal entries allow students to enter the literature in their own voice, with their ignorance showing and their naivete intact. Classbook entries reveal peers' praise and support of each other, students' willingness to see themselves as a community of learners, evaluative responses to class material and presentations, and the level at which students are grasping the literature. Classbooks differ from dialogue journals because they offer the opportunity for a third, fourth, or fifth person to enter into the exchange of responses. Classbooks extend the discourse community and expand the critical context for a course. Anyone may comment at any time; comments may be made about comments, and as the discourse evolves and inevitably changes in emphasis, authority is dispersed to the point that issues can be addressed and disagreements voiced without any person's taking offense. The classbook reveals not only what students come to know (and what they do not), but also what facts, concepts, and theories they return to and make integral to their reading, thinking and writing. (SAM)

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COLLABORATIVE JOURNALS

A FORUM FOR ENCOURAGEMENT AND EXPLORATION

ANDREA J. PERHAM
ASSOCIATE ACADEMIC DEAN
JOHNSON STATE COLLEGE
JOHNSON, VERMONT 05656

(802) 635 - 2356, X 421

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COLLABORATIVE JOURNALS
A FORUM FOR ENCOURAGEMENT AND EXPERIMENT

Andrea J. Perham, Ph.D.
Johnson State College (VT)

In addition to their regular assignments in my entry-level Romantic Poetry course, I ask students to contribute to what I call a classbook or collaborative journal. We keep this looseleaf notebook on reserve in the library and everyone, including me, adds to the book as the semester progresses. Entries are dated and addressed to individuals or to the class as a whole. There are no restrictions in format or subject -- so long as entries are somehow connected to our study of Romanticism. And there are no grades.

I am committed to the potential of the classbook as a writing-to-learn activity -- I was introduced to the concept by Dixie Goswami in a course on writing at the Middlebury College Bread Loaf School of English -- and I hope my presentation today will illustrate some of the affective, academic, and pedagogic benefits and some of the challenges inherent in making a collaborative journal integral to a course in literature. Before I proceed, however, I would like to describe briefly the educational environment in which my collaborative journal has proven so useful. Johnson State College is a four-year, co-educational, public institution of 1400 students, offering Associate's degrees, Bachelor's degrees, and Master's degrees in education and counseling. Our most popular majors are business, education, and health and environmental science. We are located in a sparsely populated (500,000 people), rural state and many of our students are the first members of their families to go to college.

Like the journals students keep in many courses today, classbooks privilege occasionally eccentric, even tangential responses. I intend the entries to be informal, off-the-cuff -- and say so in my syllabus -- but as a result, my students enter the literature in their own voice, with their ignorance showing and their naivete intact. Early in this semester, for example, one of my students insisted on reading sexual innuendoes into

Coleridge's *The Eolian Harp*, identifying as phallic "...that simplest Lute,/ Placed length-ways in the clasping casement...." I responded with a challenge, not a criticism -- does the imagery support the poem s larger concern with transcendental inspiration -- in part, because I had already taken exception to the student's interpretation in class and in part, because the entry had elicited a favorable comment from a classmate. My initial goals with the classbook are essentially affective. For the classbook to work, I must not only persuade students to write in it; I must persuade them to support one another -- and to take risks.

The classbook has got to feel safe, and I look for indications that students have begun to let down their guard. In her first entry for the semester, one student wrote: "*The Tables Turned* gave me hope. I like the idea that nature can teach us much more than we realize....People get so wrapped up in books." Another vented her frustration over *Tintern Abbey*. : "I do understand the concept of divinity in nature, but I felt we went into it too far. I hope no one gets offended, but when we go off like that you totally lose me." After about a month, students' confidence begins to grow: "I have decided not to start my entries with statements such as 'maybe I'm off-base.' I am just going to trust that you all care about my opinions enough to factor in that I am no literary person" -- this, from a Hotel/Hospitality major. A week or so later, with her naivete still intact, this student recommended the *Thesaurus of Books Digest* to her peers. I had been discussing literary allusions -- Keats' to Chapman's Homer, Wordsworth's to Don Quixote (in Book Five of *The Prelude*) -- and some students' lack of knowledge had turned defensive. "Dear Class," wrote Rachel, extending my discussion and, in the process, lending the authority of the marketplace to my position. Allusions can " broaden your own 'literary memory'.... I am impressed with all the references Chris [an English major] is able to make....I am now trying to read more...[and] I and found a wonderful book indeed." Rachel finished by adding to the classbook notes drawn from the thesaurus. "I have decided to write about the parallels between [Wordsworth's Arab figure] and Don Quixote....I offer [my notes]

as a help for those of you who feel it important to be able to make references to other books, themes and plots."

Let me pause here and underscore what these sorts of classbook entries reveal: peers' praise and support of one another, and their openness -- which indicated that my students were beginning to see themselves as a community of learners; reinforcement of the value and the potential usefulness of a critical reading skill that I had introduced in class; and evidence of the relatively pedestrian level at which many of them were entering the literature. In the margin of the classsbook I had written "thank you, Rachel" -- at the time thinking only to reinforce her enthusiasm and setting aside my Alan Bloom horror at "the closing of the American mind." But I realized later that I, like Coleridge's mariner, had, in essence, "blessed her unawares." Rachel's reference helped illustrate to me the knowledge base that one of my brighter students was using. To help Rachel and her classmates increase their ability to understand English Romanticism I needed to acknowledge their points of departure. Could I accede to this reality yet still address my original goals -- one of which was to teach the class how to explicate poetry?

Here, too, the classbook has proven helpful. I continue to use it as a reflective mirror, checking to see whether entries gain substance and sophistication, but, as the semester progresses, I expand my repertoire of encouraging comments and supportive footnotes and begin to respond in some detail to entries. And I pursue issues brought up in class and left undone. This fall, for example, my students were put off by Wordsworth's *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads.* What did he know about rural life? they asked. And as for his praise of the "language really used by men," who was he kidding? Our colloquy had been heated and inconclusive, and it was important to set Wordsworth in a context that would allow for less judgmental responses.

As the following excerpts illustrate, I was not alone in using our collaborative journal for this purpose. The student who had been the most invested in the issue began

this series of entries. Apologizing for not "conducting herself with more dignity and restraint," she wrote:

> Dear Andy:
>
> Yesterday, you uncovered a faulty fundamental belief, or way of looking at the world, that I was somewhat unaware I carried. I am, in fact, a snob in reverse. I look upon the upper classes and intellectual elite with a disdain that masks my own insecurities....."

To this student and to others sharing her perception about privileged segments of society, I responded:

> Wordsworth a snob? I'm interested that at least two people had that reaction. Is that because we, as readers, identified more with the subjects of his poetry -- with Michael and his son Luke -- than with him as an author? Wordsworth does not intend to patronize country people. He is intent on isolating the "primary laws of our nature" and his attention to the common man is a means to this end.

I went on to discuss the pastoral tradition and to refer to Rousseau's conception of the noble savage, aware of and pleased by the variety of insights and references that this collaboration had elicited and believing that the conversation was over. Two weeks later, another entry proved me wrong: "To whom it may concern: I do see WW as a snob; his high ideals to take it upon himself to educate the intellectual [reading public] about the ignorant is sort of snubbing the lower class...."

This series of excerpts is typical of many in the classbook, and I can imagine that similar interchanges occur when an instructor asks students to keep writing journals . But a collaborative journal is different because of the opportunity for third, fourth, fifth... parties to get involved and because in a collaborative journal, the instructor, besides having the whole class as a potential audience for every entry she or he might make, can easily, naturally (almost by accident), incorporate a wide variety of pedagogical strategies into the class culture -- directly reinforcing and supporting critical reading and interpretive skills -- without seeming to.

On one occasion, I seconded people's belief that a particular class had been enjoyable but focused my entry not on what was discussed (Robert Burns'

emotional appeal) but on strategies for explication that needed reinforcement. "Today, we worked through some guidelines for examining poetry and considering what range of responses is acceptable. I remember the range as follows." And I itemized the steps. On another occasion, I set for myself the following task. I added to the classbook excerpts on fancy and the imagination that I had drawn from Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* and Wordsworth's *Preface*, adding this comment to my entry: "I am going to use the classbook periodically to call attention to some BIG IDEAS. How can we make use of these BIG IDEAS in class, in the classbook, and on your papers? Maybe THEY need to be broken down and defined on their own before we can apply them to the study of the various Romantic poets under discussion...."

Identifying the values and procedures of explication and giving students practice in the techniques of close textual analysis is as important to me in this introductory class as conveying the subject matter, and in addition to highlighting what I hope as been learned or giving instructions, I sometimes model what I want done. My early efforts to include BIG IDEAS in the classbook were not especially successful. The BIG IDEAS were entered as f*aits accompli*- - - provocative quotes, interesting poems not in our text but potentially useful for comparison, a passage from Wordsworth, Coleridge or Shelley with a paraphrase appended. From there, I had hoped that the students could and would do paraphrases of their own. They couldn't. And they didn't.

This year, I learned to lay my insights out in stages. When I take a passage from *The Preface*, I annotate it for key words and write notes about the text instead of providing a polished paragraph of exegesis. And my students are beginning to follow suit. Increasingly, now, I find my students dealing with the complexities of the subjects at hand and writing to learn -- with their own intellectual needs and their audience's equally in mind.

November 18, 1992

Dear Class:

> I had a really cool thought yesterday. It seems to me that certain poems can be used as keys to the more difficult poems. Many of these writers deal with the same basic issues, so a reader can take a poem that he/she can understand and try to apply its ideas to a poem by the same author that the reader is having trouble with.
>
> Yesterday's discussion showed me how this can work. Shelley's "Mont Blanc" deals with some of the same issues as his "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty." In "Hymn" there is an unseen power that we cannot understand, so we assign names like Demon and Ghost to that power. It is from this power that Shelley receives the gift of inspiration. In "Hymn" the language is direct; whereas, in "Mont Blanc," Shelley creates a metaphor for the process instead of discussing it explicitly.

The student goes on to give several other examples of "key" poems -- unlocking Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* with references to *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud* for her peers. Her closing question: "Does this work for you? I cannot guarantee this method....Nevertheless...."

Classbooks, as I have used them, extend the discourse community and expand the critical context for a course. Anyone may comment at any time, comments can be made about comments, and, as the discourse evolves and , inevitably, changes in emphasis, authority is dispersed to the point that issues can be addressed and disagreements voiced without anyone's taking offense. The classbook reveals not only what students come to know (and what they do not), but also what has become habitual. What facts, concepts, and theories do students return to and make integral to their reading, thinking and writing? Are they ignoring or distorting certain aspects of the course? If so, I can change existing assignments, provide special reinforcement. And, in retrospect, I can consider whether the supposedly essential aspect was, after all, that essential and modify my syllabus accordingly.

Lectures and discussion are professor-centered; individual writing journals are student-based. The classbook is grounded in a community of learners which, far from reducing the professor's opportunity to convey knowledge, increases it. Besides serving

these practical ends, I believe that the classbook finally has the potential to develop an identity of its own: it can, and has, for me, become the class incarnate, with a mind, a rhythm, and an impetus which the professor cannot anticipate or contain and cannot achieve through conventional pedagogical instruments alone.